

Covid-19: Venezuelans, other refugees face huge pandemic hardships, says UN

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UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said 164 countries have either partially or totally closed their borders to fight Covid-19.

The Americas right now have become the world's epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. (Reuters Photo)

Geneva: The head of the UN refugee agency says he is "very worried" about the impact of the coronavirus in Latin America, where millions of Venezuelans have fled upheaval at home and could face hardship abroad among lockdowns and other restrictive measures to fight the pandemic.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said 164 countries have either partially or totally closed their borders to fight Covid-19. Many people who flee abroad rely on the "informal economy" often involving day work with cash wages "economic activities that are at risk as governments ratchet up coronavirus lockdowns.

"Of course, it is good that countries are taking these measures of prudence" against the virus, Grandi said. "Unfortunately, Covid-19, which has been able to cause the entire world to grind to a halt, has not been able to stop wars, conflicts, violence, discrimination."

"People are still fleeing their countries to seek refuge, to seek protection. This needs to be considered," he added, appealing to governments.

The impact could be especially stark for 3.7 million Venezuelans abroad, the world's second-largest refugee group after the 6.6 million Syrians displaced by their country's war.

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"One region about which we're very worried is, of course, Latin America and South America and in particular where countries host many millions of Venezuelans," Grandi said in an interview. "They are particularly hit by Covid."

The comments came as UNHCR issued its annual "Global Trends" report, which found that the number of asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and refugees shot up by nearly 9 million people last year "the biggest rise in its records. That created a total of 79.5 million people, accounting for 1% of all humanity, seeking safety amid conflict, repression and upheaval.

UNHCR chalked up the surge to a new way of counting people displaced from Venezuela and a "worrying" new displacement in the persistent trouble spots of Congo, the Sahel region of Africa, Yemen and Syria, which alone accounted for more than 13 million people on the move.

While the total figure of people facing forced displacement rose from 70.8 million at the end of 2018, some 11 million people were "newly displaced" last year, with poorer countries among those most affected.

UNHCR says forced displacement has nearly doubled from 41 million people in 2010, and five countries "Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar" are the source of nearly two-thirds of people displaced abroad.

Grandi also noted about 30% to 40% of the world's refugee population lives in camps. He said Covid-19 hasn't affected "in dramatic numbers" camps like those in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh "a country that has taken in nearly a million Rohingya Muslims fleeing from Myanmar" or in Africa.

Amid the outbreak, UNHCR has stepped up its "cash transfer" programs that put money directly in the pockets of displaced people. Grandi says 65 countries now benefit from such programs "and we have added 40 countries in just the last few months."

- AP